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FAIRY-TALES AS LITERATURE IN THE SCHOOL.

IT would seem that there is no longer a call for a demonstration, or even a statement, that there is a place in the child's education for the fairy-tale, that he has his moment of psychic and social ripeness for it, and that it has its own contribution to make to his culture. However much difference of opinion there still may be as to the date or duration of the moment, or as to the precise nature of the contribution, it is practically agreed that the nursery tale, whether told at home or transplanted to the school, constitutes the child's introduction to imaginative art, and as such takes on considerable educational importance. But even when we have all granted that the child needs such stories, when we have even agreed in the main as to the purposes for which we give them and the age to which they are best suited, we have, so far as the practical side of the matter is concerned, only made a beginning, because we then find ourselves facing the multiplied thousands of things called fairy-tales, with the necessity of choosing upon us. And so wide is the range in subject, and so great the difference in quality in the material, that we are obliged to conclude that it is this choice which determines the efficacy of the stories for artistic pleasure or for discipline. The really serviceable thing to be done, then, in discussing the use of the tales, particularly their use in the school, is to point out some principles of selection, some tests to be applied in considering the tales as art and as educational material.

It may help toward a set of selective principles to say, to begin with, what we mean by fairy-tales. It is impossible, in the first place, to limit the class to those stories that have in them supernatural or preternatural elements, that deal with an order of invented preterhuman beings. With the old fairy-tales, in this narrow sense, have gradually been incorporated folk-tales dealing with matter which involves only natural and human material —beast-tales and bits of comic realism, for example. With modern fairy-tales are inextricably intermingled stories of all

marvelous experiences, stories of animals, and other so-called nature stories.

The traditional tales, the real folk-tales, have been divided into these three classes: (1) *Sagas*—stories told of heroes, of supernatural beings, of historical events, of physical phenomena, and intended to be believed. They have passed out of the stage of myth, or are to be differentiated from myth by the fact that they have no religious or symbolic significance. Such a story, to take a familiar example, is *Whittington and His Cat*. (2) *Märchen*—those that are told for amusement, pure imaginative play, exercise of the art instinct. They may be modified sagas, or may be originally invented as *Märchen*. They may or may not include supernatural or preternatural elements. They constitute the large mass of nursery and popular tales. *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Puss in Boots*, *Little Red Riding-Hood*, will do as examples. (3) *Drolls*—comic or domestic tales, which also may or may not contain the impossible, the marvelous, or the preternatural. Generally they are stories of funny misadventures, cunning, tricks, horse-play, or of the misfortunes or unexpected good luck of “noodles.” Such are *Kluge Else*, *Lazy Jack*, *Mr. Vinegar*, *Hans in Luck*.

The modern stories corresponding to these are of three classes: those written in imitation of the folk-sagas and *Märchen*; those which introduce preterhuman elements as symbols; nature stories which personify natural phenomena or forces. Naturally this discussion has nothing to do with the modern story of human life that has nothing symbolic or marvelous in it.

It is not mere convention that leads one to choose for the child in school the traditional or folk fairy-tale rather than the corresponding modern story. One is reluctant to grant that there may safely be any difference between the literature given in the school and that read to the child otherwise. But it is easily seen that certain things may be read once and lightly in the nursery, read and dismissed, that are not worth reading and lingering over in the school. Many modern fairy and fanciful tales are pretty, harmless, amusing, and even instructive, and do, no doubt, contribute really to a child's recreation, but have not,

nevertheless, those abiding qualities one seeks in a story he presents as discipline. First of all, modern fairy-tales are not convinced or convincing. They are imitations, and, like all imitations, they miss the soul of the original. There can be no new fairy-tales written, because there is no longer a possibility of belief in the reality of the fairy and the fairy-world. The substitution of the "pert fairies and dapper-elves" of literature and the modern world for the serious and effectual preterhuman agents of the older folk-tales has created in the new stories an atmosphere of dilettantism, of insincerity. It is not for nothing, too, that the folk who produced the tales and the child who should hear them are upon somewhat the same level in many matters. The simplicity, earnestness, and credibility of the folk-tale adapt it to the child's use—are, indeed, the qualities that give it its child-likeness. It is practically impossible for the adult author of a modern fairy tale to keep his adultisms in abeyance. Nothing is so alien to the consciousness of the child as the consciousness of the grown, educated man; and it is by nothing less than a miracle that he can keep his own sophistication of various kinds out of what he writes for children. His fairy-tale, failing in earnestness, is likely to be full of sentimentality. Failing in belief, it is likely to be filled with cynicism and cheap satire under the guise of playfulness. These faults may be found plentifully even in the best work of Hans Christian Andersen, for example.

The obviously amateur heat-fairies, snow-fairies, flower-fairies, and all the others which figure in the merely fanciful and generally petty myth-making of the nursery, the kindergarten, and the holiday book of commerce serve chiefly to bewilder the child's imagination, and to cheapen the supernatural in his art, which should be sparing and earnest. Besides, the natural phenomena with which they are connected are much more beautiful and more appealing to the imagination if rightly presented as plain nature.

Is not the same thing true of the large mass of nature-stories also? There is no objection to a genuine story of nature—a narrative of the actual progress and evolution of an occurrence

or an object in nature. If truly observed and skilfully told, however, it stands best as actual fact, and is only confused by the introduction of personification and of pseudo-preternatural elements. The ordinary "nature-story" containing these is necessarily repudiated by literature, since its purpose is to teach scientific fact, and by science, since it proceeds by the extra-scientific methods of fiction and personification.

There are some special things to be said about the modern animal story that seem to belong in close connection with a discussion of nature-stories. Many of them must be removed from the category of nature-studies because of the fact that they are not designed to teach us the facts concerning the beast—his physiology, physiognomy, habits, or habitat—but to present his character. The human consciousness has no difficulty in taking an artistic, literary interest in the character and experience of a "little brother" so like ourselves as Rikki-tikki-pavi. Yet in these really literary animal stories—the best of Kipling's, a few of Seton-Thompson's, certain of Mr. Lang's and of Miss Pearson's—it is not at all a secondary, transferred interest we feel in them as fables, or as figures for human life, but a true, justifiable interest in the characters and situations of the creatures themselves. Kala Nag is a personality, albeit an elephant personality; the "Gray Goose" in Miss Pearson's little story has a character, a truly anserine character. It makes all the difference between science and literature whether the story aims to teach the external facts of the creature's life and nature, or penetrates by sympathetic insight below the surface and presents him as personality. Incidentally one may note that the modern animal-story, when it is good, is more acceptable to teacher and child than the traditional beast-tale, which for the most part was pure fable, mere satire, or belonged to the class of *Les Pourquois*, and therefore is to be reckoned as myth.

The modern child's story which uses certain invented and preternatural elements by way of symbol must also receive special consideration, and must not be included in the apparently sweeping condemnation of modern fairy-stories. It is, of course, to be used for children older than those for whom the

Märchen are suited. When the child is old enough and trained enough to make for himself some application of the symbol, one may expect good results from reading to him such stories as *The Bee Man of Orn* (slightly edited), *The Water-Babies* (always expurgated of Kingsley's ponderous "fooling"), and *The King of the Golden River*. But as for the sagas and *Märchen* chosen for the child when he has his distinctive hour of readiness for fairy-tales, the teacher is wise who chooses them from among the folk and traditional tales. To the people who made them the supernatural persons and powers of the tales were serious. Titania and Oberon, flower-fairies, dew-fairies, gauzy wings, and spangled skirts were not in the mind of the people who told tales of the sometimes grim and *schauderhaft*, and always serious, fairies, elves, goblins, or what not. Little brown men disappearing into a green hillock with the human child, in exchange for whom they have left in the cottage cradle a brown imp of their own; the godmother with the fairy gift who brings justice and joy to the good and oppressed maiden; the kind and gentle Beast whom love disenchants and restores to his proper form—all these are to those who made them serious art, and they should be so to the child. We must never forget that these traditional stories have the immense advantage of not having been made for the child. The *Märchen* of our day was the grown-up novel or romance of the people among whom it had its earlier history.

Then the human world of these tales is a delightful and wholesome one for the child. It is a naïve and simple world, where he may come close to the actual processes of life and see them as picturesque and interesting. Where else in our modern world can a child encounter the shoemaker, the tailor, the miller, the hen-wife, the weaver, the spinner, in their primitive dignity and importance? There are kings, to be sure, and princes, but, except in certain of the stories that took permanent literary shape in the seventeenth century, they are, like the kings and princes in the *Odyssey*, plain and democratic kings, on terms of beautiful equality with the noble swineherd or the charming tailor. King Arthur in the nursery ballad stole a

peck of barley meal to make a bag-pudding, in the homeliest and most democratic way, and the picture of the queen eating bread and honey in the kitchen seems only natural to the little democrats of six and seven in our own day. This world of genuine people and honest occupations is charming and educative in itself and constitutes the most effective and convincing background for the supernatural and the marvelous, when that element is present.

But among these tales the possibility of choice is still limitless, and the teacher needs to look for closer principles to guide him. First, since it is literature he is teaching, it would seem well to exclude myth. One is quite aware that in even the most purely social of *Märchen* there may be found relics of myth. But they are such as have long ago lost sight of their religious origin and use, and have either become entirely humanized or have taken their places as aspects of human life and experience. The study of myth undoubtedly has its place in human culture, but it is not a substitute for literature. It is with a distinct shock that one hears the sublime and terrible myth of Demeter or the noble doctrines of Apollo called "old Greek fairy-tales," and babbled in the kindergarten.

Again, keeping in mind our purpose, we would leave aside at once the crude, fragmentary, or chaotic material which appears in the folklore journals or other scientific collections, in favor of those stories which have more completeness and a more artistic form. Of course, the teacher may at any time detect in one of these apparently crude or formless records the material of a beautiful story, and may himself endow it with the artistic form which suits it. So, too, occasionally a contemporary collector of oral tales brings to light a really artistic literary story, such as certain of the Irish tales given by Yeats or by McManus, or of the Zuñi tales collected by Cushing.

But the teacher needs be very expert, very sure of himself, or must have extraordinary needs, in order to feel obliged to go outside the accepted canon of fairy-tales for his material. For there is a canon more or less fixed. It contains Grimm's Tales, Perrault's *Mother Goose* tales, a few of Madame d'Aulnoy's,

some from the *Arabian Nights*, some unhesitatingly admitted lately from collections of English folk-tales made in our own day, two or three chap-book stories, one or two interlopers like *The Three Bears* and *Goody Two-Shoes*—not popular tales at all. One would not attempt to fix the limits more narrowly, for he has no sooner closed the list than he realizes that every teacher who has used them, and every mother who has read them to her little people, and every boy and girl who loves them, will have some other tale to insert, some perfect thing not provided for in this tentative catalogue. But, on the whole, may we not agree that the list suggested constitutes the authentic, the accepted canon of fairy-tales, established and approved by the teachers and children of occidental tradition and rearing? But within this number there must be for the teacher further choice and sifting. He cannot give them all. Practically all children have too many tales read to them and supplied to them to read. A complete collection of Grimm's fairy-tales will demoralize a child's imagination by a mere surfeit. For a whole year in the fairy-tale literature (provided it be arranged in such a way) the teacher would not need a dozen tales.

Now, it would be merely fatuous not to be aware of the fact that, when one is discussing the question of this final choice, he is upon moot and delicate ground—that he is, indeed, attacking certain problems which are, in their more complex aspects, the ultimate problems of literary criticism and of æsthetics. And he must save himself from an imputation of presumption or dogmatism by confining himself to a few general principles of choice and by refraining from making a specific choice for anyone else. The teacher must constantly fortify himself by the reminder that he is seeking *literature*, and that he is therefore freed from any obligation to the stories as material for scientific folklore; he is not teaching sociology, and is therefore freed from any obligation to his material as records of the progress of civilization. While the conscience of every student should revolt from all tampering with a classic story which changes either its content or its intent, there is surely no reason why the person who

is using the tales as art should not choose those most satisfactory from the artistic point of view. Here he will apply precisely those principles he should have learned to apply in judging good and real literature anywhere. Certain of these principles, however, seem to have special application when applied as tests of the fairy-tales, and certain salient peculiarities of the tales themselves seem to condition the student's choice more narrowly. It may not, therefore, seem amiss to note a few special principles.

The teacher will select those tales that have somewhere in their history acquired an artistic organization, rejecting in favor of them those which remain chaotic and disorganized. Compare, for example, in this matter, the perfect little plot of Madame Ville-neuve's *Beauty and the Beast* with Grimm's *The Golden Bird*, a string of loosely connected, partly irrelevant incidents. He will prefer those that display economy of incident—in which each incident helps along the action, or contributes something essential to the situation. Of course, it is rather characteristic of the folk-mind, as of the child-mind, to heap up incidents *à propos de boute*; but, as this is one of the characteristics to be corrected in the child by his training in literature, so it is one of the faults which should exclude a fairy-tale from his curriculum. To make the difference among the stories in this regard quite clear, compare the neat, orderly, and essential flow of incident in *The Musicians of Bremen* with the baffling multiplicity and confusion displayed by Madame d'Aulnoy's *The Wonderful Sheep*. Other things being equal, he will prefer for discipline those fairy-stories which use the fairy and other preternatural elements in artistic moderation to those that fill every incident with marvels and introduce supernatural machinery apparently out of mere exuberance. This element is much more impressive when used in art with reticence and economy. Even a little child grows too familiar with marvels when these crowd one another on every page, and ceases either to shiver or to thrill. In the fairy-tale, as in art for mature people, the supernatural should appear only at the ultimate moment, or for the ultimate purpose, and then in amount and potency only sufficient to accomplish the

result. Perrault was very cautious upon this point. In all his tales he seems to have reduced the element of the marvelous to the smallest amount and to have called upon it only at the pivotal points. Compare, for example, in his *Cinderella* the exquisite sufficiency of his single proviso, "Now, this godmother was a fairy," with the tedious superfluity of irrelevant marvels in Grimm's version of the same tale. Is this bringing the fascinating abundance of the Teutonic folk-fancy to a disadvantageous comparison with the neat and orderly, but more commonplace, Gallic mind? It would be a pity to do that. One hastens to say that every child should hear, and should later have a chance to read, some of the free, wandering, extravagant fantasies which his teacher could not feel justified in giving him for literature lessons.

It is a mistake to ask of any piece of art that it should proclaim a moral, that it should preach a doctrine, that it should conform to fact of human experience. Indeed, one is practically always safe in rejecting from the ranks of art any bit of work that deliberately or actually does any of these things. The folk-tale may be *unmoral*, and serve the purposes of amusement and discipline in literature; but if it be *immoral* it should be left aside in favor of those more artistic, because ethically sound. Many of the popular tales turn upon a piece of trickery or disobedience or irreverence, or more serious immorality, which has upon it the weight of approval in the story. The trick or lie succeeds, and the trickster or liar is a hero. Every teacher will be wary of such as these. The pivotal issue, the central spring of a story, must in the study of it bear close inspection. If it is ethically weak it is artistically unsound.

Of course one must be very cautious here. One must not be Puritanical or Pecksniffian. Subtlety is the savage virtue. Along with horseplay it is the child's substitute for both wit and humor. The wiles and devices of the protégé of Pallas Athene but serve to endear him the more to the children to whom the *Odyssey* is read, as they did to the goddess herself. We cannot justly complete our list of literature stories from the traditional tales and exclude all in which subtlety, trickery,

constitutes the motive force. But we can see to it that the trick tends toward the securing of poetical justice, or of actual logical justice. And we must, as has been hinted, make the proper allowances. According to the nursery code there is no harm, for example, in playing a trick upon a giant. By very virtue of being a giant, with the advantage of size on his side, or with an unpardonable weight of stupidity to account for, he is fair game for all nimble-witted heroes. So also is the butcher, the hereditary villain of the folk-tales. Let it be a clear case of the biter bitten, and at the same time a clear case of the injustice or stupidity of the original biter, as it practically always is in the best *Märchen* of the canon, and one need not fear the result, certainly not the artistic result, upon the sensible child. At the same time, to use a large number of these tales would place the child in an atmosphere of trickery and petty scheming, and be most undesirable.

We are obliged to take much the same attitude toward the violence of many of the most attractive of the nursery tales. Several of them reflect a rather rough-and-tumble state of social communion; many exhibit a superfluity of bloodshed or other grisly physical horrors. It is surely not wise to read enough of these or to linger long enough over the forbidding details to create an atmosphere of terror. But fear and terror are among the roots of artistic appreciation, and it is certainly true that the modern child of six and seven has, as a rule, so little apprehension material for physical horrors that they do not take any deep hold upon him. Murder in the *Märchen* is to him actually a bit of fine art—merely a neat and convincing way of disposing of iniquitous elder brothers or inimical magicians. The fact that the child's experience and information enable him to make no image of the physiological sequelæ of the cutting off of heads, for example, makes it easy for the teacher to carry him harmless past details that would seem brutal to his nervous elders.

Those whose patience has carried them thus far in this discussion have discovered for themselves that it limits itself to the

matter of choosing the fairy-tales, and does not handle at all the more fundamental matter of their educational service, nor touch at all what may seem the more practical matter of the presentation of those chosen. Each of these is, indeed, another story.

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